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Transportation plan in high gear

South state hopes bonds can solve long-standing traffic woes

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LOS ANGELES - Before the governor could even tell voters about his massive public works plan last week, Southern California political leaders were making the case for spending billions on new roads and transit systems.

The Southern California Association of Governments held a press conference seven hours before Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's State of the State speech Thursday to announce it was, for the first time ever, giving a failing grade to the six-county region's transportation system.

"This is truly a call to action," Executive Director Mark Pisano told a bank of television cameras. "This report card is not a report card I or anybody else would want to take home."

For at least the last two decades, the association said, Southern California has recorded the most traffic congestion of any region in the country.

Rush-hour commuters in Los Angeles and Orange counties experienced an average of 93 hours of delay in 2003, the last year for which figures are available. And traffic jams cost the region an estimated \$12 billion that year.

"It's the pits," said Toni Young, the association's president and a Port Hueneme City Council member. "You just don't want to go out on the road if you don't have to. It's getting ridiculous." She was among several Southern California leaders giving a more favorable reception to the Republican governor's \$222 billion public works proposal than lawmakers who are worried about paying for the massive program.

As the state's most heavily populated region, Southern California stands to get the most money under the governor's plan.

As lawmakers and the governor debate which bond plans to put before voters, local officials will lobby for a bigger say in how the money is spent.

They said they would also urge Sacramento political leaders to use this opportunity to improve the planning process and streamline environmental reviews for public works.

"We are approaching the bonds not just as an opportunity to make up lost time, but also as an opportunity to address multiple issues at once," said Alex Padilla, a Los Angeles City Council member and League of California Cities president.

Among the issues he wants addressed are affordable housing, air quality and sprawl.

"It's driven by the need to be responsible to voters," he said. "Are we going to choose projects that are well thought-out or based on political posturing?"

The Southern California Association of Governments, for instance, is proposing more intensive development along transit routes and other transportation corridors to encourage mass transit use, limit sprawl and lower housing costs. The governor didn't propose any housing bonds, but Democratic legislators have.

They're also asking the governor to provide more transportation money to communities developing such plans and to provide more financing for developing regional plans.

Pisano, the Southern California association's director, said the state spends \$30 million to \$50 million a year on planning but vastly more - \$500 million to \$1 billion a year - on environmental impact reports.

He urged lawmakers to change the environmental review process to reduce the costs and delays associated with it.

Bill Allayaud, Sierra Club of California state director, said environmentalists oppose such changes for highways. He said they would support streamlining environmental reviews for urban housing and other projects built in already developed areas.

Allayaud said environmentalists have been working with state and local officials to develop the bond proposals because improving public works will improve the economy and state revenues. "Without a strong economy and a strong state budget, environmental programs don't get funded," he said.

Allayaud also said relieving traffic congestion around the Los Angeles-Long Beach port complex could improve the air quality in one of the most polluted parts of the state.

The Southern California Association of Governments has proposed building a truck toll road to move goods quickly from the ports while also lowering pollution and traffic congestion.

The governor's plan calls for partnerships with the private sector in building toll roads and other facilities. But it doesn't specifically address the truck tollway proposal.

It calls for nearly \$2.5 billion in carpool lanes, mass transit and other improvements in Southern California. Included in that is \$290 million for inner-city rail, a figure Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority board member Richard Katz called "a good start."

He said the authority would also need money to operate and maintain new trains and tracks, and that's not part of the governor's plan.

Katz, a former chairman of the Assembly Transportation Committee, also called for changing the state's transportation funding formulas to make sure Los Angeles doesn't get shortchanged. But he urged local officials to be "realistic" and avoid seeking too much in new policy initiatives from the bond package the governor and lawmakers hope to put on the June ballot.

"They shouldn't look at this as an opportunity to solve every problem," he said. "If they do, we will never see a bond measure."